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Nexus of social impact: news to research  
to news

Mary R. Power  
Bond University, [Mary.Power@bond.edu.au](mailto:Mary.Power@bond.edu.au)

# Nexus of social impact

## News to research to news

**Mary R. Power**

**ABSTRACT:** *Dissemination of research findings to the public involves interaction between journalists and academics. This paper follows the origins and life of one academic paper and its impact in the media, showing how journalists and academics feed one another in social impact research. Ideas current among mass audiences are analysed by academics and, in turn, ideas developed for academic audiences are repackaged for a mass audience. This paper traces how an article on deaf people's use of SMS, published in the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, was communicated to wider audiences in over 25 radio interviews, newspaper articles, and web publications. Interviews with journalists explore the possibilities in symbiotic relationships between journalists and academics.*

In a recent issue of *Spectra* (the magazine of the American National Communication Association), Braithwaite (2005) says: 'scholars submitting grant applications will increasingly be asked to speak to issues of dissemination of results—something communication researchers understand and excel at' (p. 1). In Australia, academics have expressed concern about government emphasis on the impact of research, in particular criticising the 'retrospectivity of the judging of research's impact' (Maiden & O'Keefe, 2005). Internationally, this concern is reflected in comments about the difficulties of using research impact statements that quantify

Mary Power, Faculty of  
Humanities and Social  
Sciences, Bond University,  
Queensland, Australia

the significance of research to other academics on the basis of how many times an article and its authors are quoted in journals academics cite most often (Smith, 2001). This is appropriate where one's peers are those most capable of reading, understanding, and evaluating a piece of research. However, systems of rating impact based on publication and citations in high impact journals are not without their critics. Seglen (1997) raises a number of issues and questions: e.g., Do citations of individual articles match the impact factors of the journal itself? Should generalist journals published frequently and containing long articles be compared to foreign language specialist journals that publish short articles and have a long publication lag? Is such a comparison even possible?

Concerns have been raised about the practice of some editors enhancing the citation rate of their journal by including more extended reviews (Lane, 2006). Comments have also been made about the relative merit of being a second author in a paper that took three years to research and a year to write as compared with being included as one of 27 authors who contributed data but did no substantial analysis in another. Nevertheless, publication rates and impact statements are becoming the holy grail of anyone aspiring towards advancement in an academic career. Academics at the University of Arkansas are advised to behave like journalists and answer 'W' questions such as 'Why do we care?' about the issue, problem, or opportunity their research addresses; 'What have we done?' (a short, non-technical explanation); 'What is the payoff?' (the actual and future likely economic and social benefits of the research); and 'Who are we?' (names of the principal investigators and their principal contacts and collaborators) (Retrieved October 5, 2005 from <http://www.uark.edu/depts/agripub/Publications?impact/>).

However, considering that much research is potentially relevant to the general public, we do not hear a great deal about the impact of university research activities upon the general public's awareness. Obviously, scientists who discover vaccines for meningitis or bird flu will be justly lauded by the press, but the press probably did not notice the many painstaking research papers that developed the basic theory and techniques upon which the most publicised research was built.

The press has some favourite areas. Research with 'sex' in the title is likely to make an impact. Articles by Yaqoob and Williams (2005) and Uren (2004) are typical of the 'Wow academics are even interested in sex' genre. Sometimes, journalists make fun of research they do not

understand (Bolt, 2005), but frequently they read and explain it to a much wider audience than readers of even the most highly cited journals. When Warren and Marshall ('Bacteria No Longer a Hard Prognosis to Stomach,' 2005) won the 2005 Nobel Prize for Medicine for their discovery that stomach ulcers are caused by bacteria and can be cured by antibiotics, newspaper and television coverage was extensive. Most Australians came to understand why challenging established wisdom sometimes leads to a revolution in medicine. Obviously, the general public should not make decisions about research funding for specific projects, but researchers do rely upon the public's (and politicians') general acceptance of claims that research in universities enhances the human condition and ought, in general, to be supported.

In a *British Medical Journal* editorial, Smith (2001) distinguishes between the quality of a piece of research and its impact (on healthcare in this case). Smith suggests that health research impact could be measured using seven indicators: content analysis, software, products, funding of research, publicity, memberships, and teaching. Under 'publicity' he lists 'Presentations for a non-scientific audience, Fact Sheets, Public Media and Internet' (p. 528). This paper explains in detail the impact a particular piece of social science writing had through the last two of these: public media and the Internet.

What happens to ideas from academic writing that are taken up by the press, radio, and Internet publications? What does the process of dissemination involve? This paper traces the dissemination of academic research from a conference paper, to a published academic journal paper, to the popular media.

## **Background**

The research began by examining newspaper reports of how deaf people were using Short Message Service (SMS) to communicate. A paper based on that research was published in *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* (Power & Power, 2004). This academic report then became the focus of the public media's attention. Following publication of the paper (Power & Power, 2004), which had started out as a National Communication Association Conference refereed presentation, the authors were contacted by several journalists. The first author decided to trace the dissemination of the findings of the paper to a wider audience.

## Method

This paper focuses on the dissemination of the research findings through the Internet, radio, and newspapers. Records were kept of interviews, and copies of articles about, and references to, the research were collected. In addition, searches of the Factiva newspaper database, Google Web, Google News, and Google Scholar were conducted. These searches, along with some serendipitous findings, resulted in a collection of over 25 radio interviews, newspaper articles, and web publications based on the original paper.

## Chronology

Following research on SMS use by young people (Power & Horstmanshof, 2004), Power and Power, unable to find articles analysing this phenomenon in academic journals related to the deaf, investigated a newspaper database ('Factiva') for reports of Deaf people's use of SMS in their daily lives.

In February 2004, Power and Power submitted a paper to the (American) National Communication Association (NCA) Disability Issues Caucus: 'Everyone Here Speaks Txt: Deaf People in Australia Using SMS'. By the time of the NCA Convention, in November 2004, the authors had worked more on the paper, absorbed reviewers' comments, and submitted it to *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*. The editors of this journal were interested because, to their knowledge, no academic journal of deaf studies had published anything on SMS, although Power and Power's study indicated that it was a tool widely used by deaf people to communicate with both deaf and hearing friends, family, and for business and work purposes.

Following publication, Heather Catchpole, a journalist from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), contacted Mary Power, who sent her a copy of the article.

Catchpole interviewed Mary Power by telephone about the research and the article, and published an online article, 'Def ppl luv 2 txt' (Catchpole, 2004). Catchpole's article was central to the dissemination of the paper's findings, as many future reporters first heard of the research through its appearance on the ABC Online website. Many relied upon it as their only source of news of the Power and Power paper. Almost immediately, Catchpole's article was found on technology websites such as the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) Website ('Def ppl luv 2 txt', retrieved August 25 2004 from [http://www.amta.org.au/news\\_list.asp](http://www.amta.org.au/news_list.asp)).

Another listing, on the WebIndia site, led to its being disseminated throughout India on websites and in the press: 'SMS turns a deaf ear to disability' (retrieved 25 August, 2004 at <http://news.webindia123.com/news/>). Reference to the Power and Power (2004) research also appeared on other newspaper and Internet sites in India, under the same title as above (2004, August 17; retrieved 11 October, 2005 from <http://health.allrefer.com/news/index.php?ID=6551>); 2004, August 17; retrieved 11 October, 2005 from <http://www.abilityinfo.com/ticker/arch/archintl.html>; 2004, August 27; retrieved 11 October, 2005, from <http://www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2004/08/04/scince.htm>).

In Australia, following Catchpole's online publication by the ABC (Catchpole, 2004), Mary Power was interviewed on ABC Central Queensland Rockhampton radio by journalist Chris Lawson on 18 August 2004 (Lawson, 2004). At that point, Mary Power began to collect details of interviews. Des Power was interviewed by ABC Alice Springs and ABC Launceston. It appears that ABC reporter Craig Zonker's (Hessian, 2004) interview with Mary Power was broadcast on 19 August 2004 to other local radio stations, in the towns of Longreach (by ABC Western Queensland) and Bundaberg (by ABC Wide Bay). These replays of the original interview might have gone unnoticed but for the head of Bond University's Corporate Communication section, whose custom is to relay to relevant staff reports received from the university's media monitoring contractor, Media Monitors.

Journalist Michael Bradley contacted Mary Power, who sent him a copy of the Power and Power (2004) article. Having read it, Bradley interviewed Mary Power, and published a piece titled 'Deft fingers break down deaf barrier' in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 14 September (Bradley, 2004). He also interviewed Greg Leigh of the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, who had also read the Power and Power (2004) article.

On the same day that Bradley's article was published, Mary Power was interviewed by a Sydney radio station; on the following day she was interviewed by Paul Bevan for ABC radio in Newcastle.

Popular magazines also picked up on the Catchpole (2004) article. A deaf friend reported that her hearing mother had read about the Power and Power research in two weekly women's magazines. Mary Power was able to find only one of these, a magazine called *Take 5*, whose intriguing cover titillated with headlines such as 'My baby was

born on the day I died', 'Dr Dirty—He prescribed sex—with him!', 'My hubby demanded more wives', an '8-page passion extra', and '16 ways to find love'. Although an article on deaf people using SMS to communicate was not headline material for this audience, the editor's presentation of the material was skilful in terms of both content and layout. Relying on the Catchpole article on ABC Online, *Take 5* spread the story across two pages, including a brief summary and two direct quotes in numbered text boxes in order to highlight the article's key points. E.g., 'Professor Mary Power, from Queensland's Bond University, recently wrote about how SMS is creating new social opportunities for the deaf. "The more people communicate, the more chance they have of forming a relationship" she said'. (*Modern technology*, 2004, October 15, p. 20).

In October 2004, Journalist Phil Teese, from the Bond University magazine *Focus*, interviewed Mary Power and published a short article 'Let your fingers do the talking' (Teese, 2004). Following this interview, journalist Sharon Kells, from *The Gold Coast Bulletin*, interviewed Mary Power, using the interview as a basis for two articles on SMS. In a brief explanation of SMS codes, she explained, 'Dr. Mary Power says texters have a language code all of their own, and with only 160 characters to play with, they have become inventive in their message exchanges' (Kells, 2004b . p. 4) . In her broader article focusing on deaf people, she quoted Mary Power as follows: 'What texting was effectively doing was giving the deaf equal footing with every owner of a mobile phone.... They were finally being able to 'speak' to hearing people' (Kells, 2004a, p. 4).

In October, freelance journalist Fran Molloy contacted Des and Mary Power, who sent her the original article (Power & Power, 2004). After interviewing both authors by telephone, she wrote an article, published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 30 October 2004, in which she said:

*The use of SMS has also helped reduce the isolation many deaf people have had from mainstream communication. 'They can use things like roadside assistance, book tickets,' Power says. 'It's just made life so much easier; it has been revolutionary'. (Molloy, 2004, p. 3)*

At the same time as this public media cross referencing was going on, the usual academic collecting of references continued. References were found in the International Bibliography of Sign Language Research (<http://www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/bibweb/F-Authors.htm>); the

Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) Clearinghouse; and Pubmed (the National Library of Medicine's search service).

Journalist Patrick Gray contacted Mary Power, was sent a copy of the Power and Power (2004) article, and summarised it for *Wired News* under the title 'Deaf benefit greatly from SMS' (2004, October 18; retrieved, October 5, 2005 from <http://www.wired.com/news/wireless/0,1382,65363,00.html>).

In Gray's article, Power and Power are anonymous 'Australian researchers', although he did mention the name of the original paper 'Everyone Here Speaks TXT'. In November 2004, *IceMedia* summarised Gray's *Wired News* article 'Deaf Benefit Greatly from SMS' (2004, November 25; retrieved, October 5, 2005 from [http://www.icemedia.com.au/asp/index.asp?sid=5&page=news\\_article&cid=136&id=58&gid=13](http://www.icemedia.com.au/asp/index.asp?sid=5&page=news_article&cid=136&id=58&gid=13)), naming Mary R. Power from Bond University, Queensland, and Des Power from Griffith University, Queensland as the authors of 'Everyone Here Speaks TXT' in *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, and providing a link to an extract from the paper.

In some of the articles (Gray, 2004; Molloy, 2004), deaf people or those employed in deaf organisations were asked to comment, and so awareness both of deaf people's needs and their use of technology was increased. There was also some private response. A hearing man who read the Bradley articles in *The Sydney Morning Herald* e-mailed Des Power to tell him how SMS had affected the way his two deaf sons could contact him, simplifying his life when he had to arrange to pick them up from their activities, and giving them greater freedom to organise their own lives.

### **Journalists' choices**

In June 2005, Mary Power rang the ABC's Heather Catchpole and asked her how journalists choose stories to feature. Catchpole suggested calling Anna Evangeli, the ABC's Science Editor. Anna Evangeli (personal communication, 29 June 2005) talked about the process of selecting newsworthy articles. She said that ABC researchers would have seen the Power and Power article in a Table of Contents from an alerting service. As they have a young audience for *Science OnLine* they would have been interested in new advances in technology, and SMS is something that would appeal to that audience. Furthermore, any research that is Australian is important to *Science OnLine*. Evangeli said that once the article is on the website 'it is anybody's guess as to who

reads it'. *Science Online* is aware that half their audience is Australian and the other half comes from across the globe. People who are interested in a story often put a link to it in their weblog, mention it at conferences, discuss it with their colleagues, and disseminate it on e-mail lists. Also, *Science OnLine* keeps in touch with researchers, and will sometimes find out from them about some research that is just about to be published.

The website 'We Make Money not Art' (2004, August 17) also summarised the ABC online article (Retrieved 5 October, 2005 from <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/002402.php>), as did Yahoo India (2004, September 4; retrieved 5 October, 2005 from <http://in.tech.yahoo.com/040904/139/2fvpo.html>). The Yahoo India article was summarised as 'Text Messaging puts Deaf in Mainstream' on September 5, 2005, on the following web pages: (<http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/005202.htm> Retrieved 5 October, 2005) and <http://www.wired.com/news/wireless/0,1382,65363,00.html> Retrieved 5 October, 2005). Gray's (2004) *Wired News* article was also summarised by the web site 'Textually' (2004, October 18; retrieved 5 October, 2005 from <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/005735.htm>

The findings of one academic study spread by means of website entries, newspaper articles, radio interviews, and database entries to a much wider audience than the original readers of *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*.

## Discussion

Almost all the reporting of the research findings occurred in Australia and India, although SMS is a world-wide phenomenon. The use of the provocative 'Australia and the rest of the world' in the original title was a reference to the fact that Australia, along with some other countries such as India, leads the United States and other countries in deaf people's use of SMS. Significantly, the only two direct references from non-Australian sources came from WebIndia and Australian freelance writer Patrick Gray, who summarised Power and Power's findings for the (American) site *Wired News*.

In Australia, a network of public broadcasting radio stations (the ABC) operates cooperatively to feed news about health and technology developments to its audience. No evidence that commercially operated radio stations picked up on the story was found, although two popular women's magazines were found to have done so.

Although *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* is published by Oxford University Press, with wide distribution across the world and particularly in the US, references to the Power and Power (2004) article were found only in the online *Wired News* in the US and in academic database systems such as PubMed and ERIC.

## Conclusion

This paper has tracked the press, radio, and Internet publicity resulting from a published academic paper on the use of SMS by deaf people in Australia and the rest of the world. In Australia, print and ABC radio journalists appear to monitor public broadcasting sites, which provide them with details of research. They bring it to the attention of the public and translate it into formats in which it can be easily understood. Journalists thus contribute to the impact of research through reports aimed at specific audiences across the social spectrum.

Dissemination of research findings to the public is a complex process involving journalists and academics. The popular media keeps the community aware of communication issues, while academics' reflections upon these issues, and further research, create more news. When academics are available for interview, and make their papers available to journalists (who are funded to spend time reading and summarising research), news of research spreads to a larger audience, showing impact (Smith, 2001) through the public media and Internet.

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